

## “Recipe”: A Documentary on Language and Identity

### Artist’s Statement

I was writing an anecdotal essay for my first semester of English classes at Reynolds Community College when I suddenly realized that I was writing about things that I would have had a hard time writing about in my native Armenian, and not because of lack of vocabulary. It felt like with English I was given a second opportunity, a second chance to write and talk about my identity and my queerness in perhaps a liberating way. This realization meant also that my relationship with my native Armenian was now shifted. The language I had used almost exclusively throughout my conscious and unconscious life until just years prior to that class—the language of the lullabies my mom sang for me, was not enough anymore. It felt like I was betrayed by and that I had betrayed my Armenian at the same time. Questions that needed answers had now arisen: how does a second/non-native language affect a bilingual/multilingual person’s identity and self-perception? Does it offer more opportunities or create more obstacles when it comes to the person’s expressiveness, identity construction, and self-perception? And in the midst of all that, how is the role of the native/heritage language affected?

I started my journey with close reading of scholarly texts in the areas of linguistics, psychology, and sociology, which organically led me to sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics. While *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson or *Language and Identity* by John Edwards have provided me with a necessary foundation in my exploration of the topic, other journal articles have informed my research more thoroughly when it comes to the language acquisition

process and the expressiveness of a second language. Such sources were Polanyi's "Language Learning and Living Abroad. Stories from the Field," as well as Ladilova's "Language and Identity of Migrants." And while some of the journal articles I found have helped me shape my research question, others paved a road to the answers I seek. In the sea of the research done on my chosen topic, I have favored the scholarly sources that are backed with hands-on research (e.g., "When is a First Language More Emotional? Psychophysiological Evidence from Bilingual Speakers" by Harris et al.), including primary sources such as interviews and experiments. The more I read, the more evidence I found supporting the theory that the second (non-native) language can allow as much (or even more) expressiveness as the native/heritage language.

I then decided on an additional research method, which was to conduct interviews with bilingual/multilingual speakers with diverse backgrounds and languages. These interviews allowed me to address my research question with consideration of unique and individual experiences of my interviewees. Commonalities found in answers to the same questions during these different interviews were key to my research and served as evidence for my growing understanding of this experience. More than that, these interviews with five bilingual/multilingual individuals offered me different perspectives on how I thought of the relationship between one's languages and one's self.

So, what is it like to speak multiple languages? Is it not enough, or perhaps too much of each at any given time? Do they work together or are they in a quarrel? Answers to these questions will vary person to person, but what if we thought of these languages as ingredients needed for a dish? We do not question a recipe for a complicated dessert, even if we think that some of the ingredients might not/should not work together. We mix the ingredients, we play with the mixture, and we often make a mess. But with some patience and with the magic of

time, we have something sweet as a result.

This idea of “language-ingredients” is the symbolic/metaphorical reason why I chose to feature my mom’s pakhlava (Armenian baklava) recipe in my short documentary. At the same time, the “recipe talk” with my mom has always been the safe and comforting space where shortcomings of my native Armenian were not apparent. In this space, we do not discuss our feelings, emotions, or other “hard topics” (in Armenian); it has always been a world of techniques, tablespoons, and flavors. Except, in the footnotes of it all, it has also been our little ritual of sharing our love and care for each other; my curiosity about my mom’s dishes and her eagerness to share and teach me were the means of connection and bonding.

In the short documentary, the different steps of my mom’s pakhlava-making process appear in between the interviews. Creating this sequence of symbolism and personal stories of others, I hope, will become a roadmap to understanding the unique intersection of language and identity construction/maintenance.

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## Interviews

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Brooks, Ekaterina. Interview. Conducted by Arsen Khachatryan. January 29, 2024

Palyan, Hrach. Interview. Conducted by Arsen Khachatryan. January 29, 2024

Mao, Michelle. Interview. Conducted by Arsen Khachatryan. February 8, 2024.

Chakhalyan, Vahan. Interview. Conducted by Arsen Khachatryan. March 3, 2024.

# Appendix A

## Interview Questions

- Please tell me about the languages you speak; language(s) you grew up with and language(s) you use today.
- Do you think that a language other than your native one offers you more self-expression? If yes, in what way?
- When did you come to a realization of the differences between your languages when it comes to the levels or modes of self-expression each offers, and what did this realization entail?
- What would you say your language homeland is?
- Is [language 1]-speaking [your name] different from [language 2]-speaking [your name]? If yes, what are these differences?